



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS BY STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS

Isn't substance use just a normal part of being a teenager?

An important message that we should all repeat to middle school and high school students is that the majority of teens do not use alcohol or other substances (including marijuana), contrary to what may be conveyed in the media and elsewhere. Although marijuana use has increased in recent years, the majority of high school seniors still report never having tried marijuana, and the rates of use for almost every other substance, including alcohol, have fallen dramatically since the 1990s. And, they continue to fall on national surveys with each passing year.

What are things that parents can do to prevent teens from using alcohol or other substances?

There are lots of things that we can recommend to parents to prevent teen substance use. Many of them are common sense. Parents, teachers, coaches, and other adults can model responsible behavior, foster positive and supportive relationships, and maintain open lines of communication, including asking questions about whether teens or their peers have tried substances. Parents, teachers, coaches, and other adults should also set rules and limits for teens, and expect them to abide by them. Everyone should learn the signs of problematic substance use – like sudden changes in behavior, unexplained decline in grades, changes in mood – and when problems are suspected, get help promptly from a medical professional.

Now that marijuana is legal in Massachusetts – and in many states, allowed for medical reasons – does that mean it is safe?

Marijuana is legal for recreational use in Massachusetts, but only for people 21 years and older. This reflects the fact that marijuana, although legal, is still harmful, particularly for teens. Marijuana has effects on the developing teen brain. In the long term, it puts teens who use it regularly (such as every day or almost every day) at risk for lower IQ, depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems. In the short term, marijuana causes problems with memory, which means it can affect performance in school, and with coordination, which means it can affect sports performance.

What's safer: alcohol or marijuana?

Both alcohol and marijuana have harms. While alcohol causes damage to your liver, heart, and other organs, marijuana harms the developing teen brain. In the long term, both alcohol and marijuana have been linked to depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems, as well as addiction. In the short term, both substances can affect memory, judgement, coordination, and cause problems with school and sports performance. They also both increase the risk for serious car crashes for people who drive while using them. So, neither is safe, and it's best to choose not to use either as a teen!

If a teen is going to drink alcohol anyway, isn't it better for parents to allow this to happen at home so that they can be safer?

The potential harms of alcohol – including damage to the liver, heart, and other organs, and long-term risk for depression, anxiety, addiction, and other mental health problems – happen regardless of where someone drinks. Some people have argued that teens have a 'healthier relationship' with alcohol in European countries and other places in the world where young people are introduced to alcohol by their parents or are allowed to drink under their parents' supervision. This is not completely true. Studies show that teens who are introduced to alcohol by their parents or are allowed to drink at home still often have problems from alcohol use. In fact, many of these same countries have much higher rates of health problems caused by alcohol.

Why is marijuana used for medical reasons?

Currently, studies show that marijuana is only helpful for a very small number of medical conditions. Most teens do not have one of these conditions, meaning that marijuana is not needed. Conditions that marijuana might help are vomiting ("throwing up") and nausea ("feeling sick to your stomach") after receiving treatment for cancer, or for seizures (uncontrollable shaking caused by the brain) that do not respond to other medications. Even in these cases, doctors typically don't recommend that people smoke marijuana to treat themselves, since the important ingredients in marijuana that may be helpful are often available in pill form.

I've heard that people should never drive drunk, but some people say that they drive better when they smoke marijuana. Is this true?

Marijuana affects people's ability to drive safely. Scientific studies show that people who have marijuana in their system are twice as likely to be killed in a car crash. This is likely because marijuana affects judgement and coordination, both of which are important for driving safely.

Is marijuana smoke safer than cigarette smoke?

Both marijuana smoke and cigarette smoke can be harmful. Cigarettes have filters, which remove some of the toxins in cigarette smoke, but many still get into people's lungs and cause cancer, heart attacks, strokes, and other serious health problems. Marijuana smoke is not filtered, and has many of the same cancer-causing toxins in it as does cigarette smoke. People who smoke marijuana can develop a bad cough or worsen asthma symptoms.

Are e-cigarettes safer than regular cigarettes?

Because e-cigarettes don't have the same burned toxins as do regular cigarettes, there are fewer cancer-causing toxins in e-cigarettes. However, there are still many of the same carcinogens (toxins that cause cancer), and studies have not yet fully identified all the potential harms of e-cigarette smoke. Also, recent studies show that when teens use e-cigarettes, they are more likely to go on to use regular cigarettes in the future. So, it's important to stay away from e-cigarettes as a way of preventing starting regular cigarettes.

Why do some people use prescription pills to get high? Are they safe, since a doctor prescribes them?

Some pills that people misuse include oxycodone, Oxycontin, Percocet, and Vicodin, among others. These are prescription opioids, and although doctors prescribe them for pain, they are very dangerous when used without a doctor's advice. There are other doctor-prescribed medications that are dangerous, too, like Xanax. All these medications put people at risk of dying from an overdose because they cause people to stop breathing, especially if mixed together or with alcohol.

People on the news often talk about heroin and fentanyl. What are these?

Heroin is a drug that is often made in other countries and then is illegally brought to the United States. It is an opioid, like the prescription pills, oxycodone, Oxycontin, Percocet, and Vicodin. However, it is outlawed in the United States and almost every other country because it is much more powerful and dangerous than other opioids. Fentanyl, like heroin, is very dangerous, but in certain situations can be prescribed by a doctor. However, a lot of fentanyl in the United States right now is made illegally and very dangerous. Like prescription pills, both heroin and fentanyl can cause an overdose if someone takes too much, and that person may die because they stop breathing.

Can someone who is having an overdose be saved?

For someone who has taken too many opioid pills, or has used heroin or fentanyl, there is a medication, called naloxone, or Narcan, which can reverse an overdose. Naloxone is sprayed up the nose and can save someone's life. If you know someone who uses opioids, they may be at risk for having an overdose, and it is always a good idea for family members to have naloxone nearby – in the house, and in a purse or bag that they always carry – in order to be prepared if they find someone who may have had an overdose.